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'Last Chance Saloon' Ends Checkered Career

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From Temperance Hotel to Wide-Open Bar; Historic 'Atlantic Hotel' Being Torn Down

By J. H. SHIRLEY

This is the story of "The Last Chance Saloon" on Atlantic Ave., Calgary, and a few remarks about Freddy "Shorty" McCarthy, aged 86, who started as bartender and finally bought "The House." It is also a story about Calgary's early days which were robust and lusty, the landmarks of which are rapidly passing from the modern scene.

At the present time workmen are demolishing what is left of one of the pioneer hostelries which for the past 25 years has been used as a battery shop located at 420-422 9th Ave. E.

In its final episode as a hotel the place was called the Oxford Hotel.

"BUCKET OF BLOOD"

In its heyday the place was named the Atlantic Hotel and known from coast to coast as "the Bucket of Blood" for it was rough and tough and its history is one of fights and deeds of violence including at least one fatal shooting.

"Shorty" McCarthy came west with the steel gang which laid the C.P.R. main line into Calgary which he reached on August 14, 1883. He started to work as bartender in the Atlantic in 1896 when it obtained its first licence to sell liquor.

He continued to work at the hotel until 1909 when he bought the equipment for $27,000 and took over the management. He sold the Atlantic in 1911 for $35,000 and in partnership with Joe Clements, of Dog Pound, owned four race horses which raced at Vancouver, Santiago, Tiajuana and other West Coast tracks.

DISASTROUS VENTURE

The venture was disastrous for the horses "ran just fast enough to lose money," according to "Shorty."

Today "Shorty" is an old-age pensioner living in a one-room suite on 8th Ave. E. He has a large circle of friends and is never happier than when talking about "the good old days" over a pint of beer.

Like many of the early inhabitants it can be said of the hotel that it came from poor but honest parents, for it was originally built in 1890 as a Temperance House with from 12 to 14 rooms.

R. C. Thomas, well-known pioneer, recalls that he used to stay at the Temperance House when he rode in from the ranch.

The house was enlarged from time to time and in 1896 when the licence to sell liquor was obtained the place was named the Atlantic Hotel and was operated in conjunction with the nearby Atlantic barn which accommodated 60 teams of horses.

COWBOYS' RENDEZVOUS

It was the rendezvous of cowpunchers, railroad construction workers and other turbulent elements and quickly earned the unofficial title "The Bucket of Blood."

To all men leaving Calgary by the East road it was known as "The Last Chance Saloon," for from there on the bone dry prairies extended.

Travellers to the city over the dusty trails called it "The First Chance Saloon" and speeded up their jaded horses as they neared the oasis.

The more peaceful residents of the town gave it a wide berth, for according to reports, the unwary were liable to be "slugged" and robbed and there were always a few men nearby willing to start a fight at the least provocation.

The Atlantic Hotel really hit the headlines in The Herald on March 17, 1902, for on the previous day Arthur Simpson, a resident in the hotel, was fatally wounded by a revolver shot fired during a brawl in the hotel.

He died three days later despite the skilled administrations of Drs. Mackid and Stewart.

SENTENCED TO 10 YEARS

R.N.W.M.P. and town police started a search for George W. Scouten, one of the operators of the Atlantic Stable, who fled the scene immediately after the shooting, and a few days later he returned to town and was arrested in the office of the Thomas stable.

On May 10, 1902, Scouten was acquitted on the murder charge by a jury but was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years in Manitoba penitentiary by Chief Justice McGuire.

According to "Shorty" Mc-

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Historic Hotel Is Dismantled

Carthy the hotel changed hands every few years, but he continued as bartender and flourished financially, although the top pay for bartenders was $50 a month with board and room.

By 1909 "Shorty" was able to lay $27,000 on the line and took over the hotel which was provided with a new false front of brick veneer and re-named The Oxford Hotel. To this day the false front still faces 9th Ave. E. and the name "Oxford Hotel, 1910," in cement letters still is visible high on the wall.

SPIT ON SILVER DOLLARS

When asked how he had managed to save such a large sum on such a small salary, "Shorty" grinned reminiscently and replied: "Well, in those days every time a silver dollar passed over the bar the tender would spit on it, give it a flip, and if it stuck to the ceiling it belong to 'The House'. If it didn't stick it went into the bartender's pocket."

What he called "knocking down" appeared to be a common practice in those days, and one hard to detect, for the liquid stock was rarely checked. Yet in spite of the shortages the owners managed to make plenty of money in a comparatively short period.

"Shorty" sold out for $35,000 in 1911 to Johnny Rioux, who operated the Oxford until 1915 when the bars were closed by the advent of prohibition.

UNFORTUNATE PLUNGE

With the proceeds of the sale and a sizable pile of profits, "Shorty" then made his unfortunate plunge into the "sport of kings" and was pretty well cleaned out, he is willing to admit with a rueful grin.

Back in the old days liquor was cheap and plentiful and the drinks sold "two for a quarter" and the patron could take either big schooners of beer or pour his own drink of spirits with a beer chaser if preferred. Later the price was changed to "ten cents straight" for beer and 15 cents for spirits. Mixed drinks such as John Collins and cocktails were always 15 cents straight.

One old custom sadly missed today was the practice of "The House" putting up the first drink free for each patron between the hours of 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. Recalling this "Shorty" remarked "the barflies made a tour of the eight or nine bars in the city and managed to get a free 'snootful' before breakfast, just to start the day right."

BARS OPENED AT 6 A.M.

The bars in the early days were open from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily except Sunday. Later the hours were changed from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Friday and 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturday. But the earlier closing did not prevent the thirsty from enjoying a drink for "Shorty" explained: "When the front door closed the back door opened and business went on as usual."

Incidentally all licenced hotels had to maintain bed rooms and a dining room and the Atlantic Hotel in 1902 advertised it was "The best $1 house in the West." And for that dollar-a-day, room and meals were provided.

As the interview languished "Shorty" McCarthy accepted another bottle of beer and commenced to comment in rather uncomplimentary terms on the present prices of liquor.

SCOTCH $9 A CASE

This opened another door in his keen memory and he told that in the good old days the wholesale price of Scotch was $9 a case of 24 bottles of 24 oz. capacity; rye was $7 a case; gin was $6 a case, with "square face" costing $8 a case. "Mickies" of rye cost the "house" $9 for 36.

Retail price for bottled goods was rye $1.25; scotch $1.50 and gin $1.10; mickies sold for 75 cents.

Champagne cost $28 for a case of 24 pints and sold for $2.50 a pint. "Shorty' gleefully recalled that when he was a bartender and the champagne drinking patrons "got high" he substituted ginger ale and pocketed the difference.

"Shorty" says he has had his "ups and downs, but taking things as they came I've had a good time most of the time."